

Parliament and European integration: postwar MPs and their memories of a long history



Emma Peplow and **Priscila Pivatto** draw on oral history interviews with postwar MPs to highlight their diverse political experiences in Parliament, particularly with regards to the question of Europe.

*I was always pro-European [...] but if you think back to the late '80s and early '90s you've got a new situation where the Tory Party is quarrelling over Europe, split over Europe, [...] John Major finding it difficult to handle it. I have allies in the Tory Party like Kenneth Clarke. My own party is a bit split on the issue. I know that the new generation, [Tony] Blair, [Gordon] Brown and [Peter] Mandelson, I know that they are pro-European instinctively but they're not going to risk much on it, either electorally, because they know it's a fifty-fifty issue, but also because it splits the Labour Party. **Giles Radice, Labour 1973-2001***

The deep political fault lines in British politics over the country's involvement in European integration, impossible to escape in recent years, feature strongly in the History of Parliament Trust's long-running [oral history project](#). Since 2011, the Trust has been interviewing MPs who sat from the 1950s until 2010 about their lives and experiences. We undertake 'life story' interviews, which explore our interviewees' experiences from childhood right through to the present day and do not just focus on their time at Westminster. Over 175 interviews have now been deposited with our partner, the [British Library](#).

Our new book, based on extracts from the archive, [The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs](#) acts as an introduction and guide to the archive. It contains memories, insights, and frustrations on crucial European debates from both pro- and anti-European integration politicians who were members of all major parties.

Collecting these personal and thoughtful recollections together, from all sides of the political spectrum, highlights why Europe was so difficult to deal with in parliament. Both parties were deeply split on the issue, and both parties contained groups of fierce partisans on either side of the European debate, leaving others struggling to maintain traditional party unity. This toxic mix helped to cause months of parliamentary chaos long before 2016.

Some of those who sat in the early 1970s, when Edward Heath took Britain into the European Economic Community (EEC), described in detail the informal but serious cross-party organisation by those both for and against the European Communities bill that incorporated EEC law into UK law. The then Labour cabinet minister David Owen (Labour/SPD, 1966-92), who was in favour of the EEC but whose party who were opposing the legislation, remembered:

<https://blogsmedia.lse.ac.uk/blogs.dir/8/files/2020/08/LSE-Clip-1-David-Owen.mp3>

Those in Labour who were against joining the EEC in principle also organised with like-minded Conservatives. Ronald Murray (Labour, 1970-79) described the anti-EEC group as 'a little separate lobby' and David Stoddart (Labour, 1970-83) recalled the involvement of Enoch Powell, Richard Body, Nigel Spearing and Peter Shore: 'there were very clever people in it'.

Several pro-Europe interviewees criticised Labour leader Harold Wilson's tactics in opposing the European Communities bill (especially as Wilson had tried to join the Community himself when Prime Minister) – 'humbug' – in the words of David Owen, and Dick Taverne (Labour/SDP, 1962-72; 1973-September 1974) later resigned the party whip and stood as an independent on the issue. Frustrations around Labour's divisions over Europe was one of the reasons these two, and others, left Labour to help form the Social Democrat Party in 1981 (discussed in more detail in our book).

In 1992-3, it was divisions within the Conservative Party that nearly derailed John Major's attempts to ratify the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that created the European Union. Major had returned from Maastricht believing he had won enough concessions to avoid any serious trouble in his party, as remembered by John Hannam (Conservative, 1970-97), secretary of the powerful backbench 1922 Committee:

<https://blogsmedia.lse.ac.uk/blogs.dir/8/files/2020/08/LSE-Clip-2-John-Hannam.mp3>

Of course, the concessions Major won were not enough to dissuade the rebels. For example, James Cran (Conservative, 1987–2005) felt that an opt-out on the single currency was not enough protection against joining it: ‘once you’ve got that door open you’ll never be able to keep a foot in it because there are always going to be pressures on you to join’. Several of the rebels describe how organised their campaign was, as Roger Knapman (Conservative 1987–97) does in this extract:

<https://blogsmedia.lse.ac.uk/blogs.dir/8/files/2020/08/LSE-Clip-3-Roger-Knapman.mp3>

Major’s problems were made worse by a united Labour party determined to embarrass the government. Although, in Giles Radice’s words, the generally pro-European Labour leadership was ‘playing silly buggers’ the party stayed united. Labour’s Chief Whip, Derek Foster (Labour, 1979–2005) told us:

My greatest achievement as a chief whip was during the Maastricht process, which should have been quite smooth for the Prime Minister John Major. By astute use of parliamentary tactics with all the parliamentary party, including the twelve rebels, we managed to string it out for ten months and it was a fairly miserable period for John Major. He had a twenty-two [seat] parliamentary majority, but he had well over thirty rebels. I had to get all the minority parties in agreement with us, so we could push him into the hands of his own rebels one week by choice of subjects, and we could push him into the hands of the Ulstermen the other week. So I think this was very fundamental in getting John Major the image of a sort of weak prime minister.

For Conservatives not amongst the rebels, many remembered the period with exasperation – David Nicholson (Conservative, 1987–97) ‘felt very annoyed that a small number of people were keeping us up through the night.’ John Marshall (Conservative, 1987–97) described the whole Parliament as ‘really a very unhappy Parliament’ as the divisions continued long after the Treaty legislation had passed. As we now know, they are with us still.

Note: the above draws on the authors’ recent book, [The Political Lives of Postwar British MP](#), published by Bloomsbury Academic in August 2020.

About the Authors



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